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October 18, 2009: Where Does Relativism Come From?

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Title: Where Does Relativism Come From?

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10/18/2009—As I have been doing research for an upcoming book on a new, higher law approach to the Establishment Clause, I have looked at the attitude of the New Atheists toward relativism and its darker twin, nihilism. My proposal is that the government may combat relativism in educational efforts that include the use of religious symbols. The idea of higher law or objective value in general is that there is such a thing as right and wrong beyond human opinion. I had assumed that the New Atheists, such as Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, would endorse relativism, but they do not. Harris said in Newsweek a couple of years ago that he believes in absolute right and wrong and in 2002 Hitchens berated the left for not recognizing the “evil” of Saddam Hussein. Only Richard Dawkins seems to accept relative values as the actual state of the universe. The New Atheists are certainly attacked as promoting relativism, so what is going on? Of course it may be that the New Atheists are lying for propaganda purposes. They might just not want to admit that their positions are essentially nihilistic. Or, it may be that their positions are nihilistic despite themselves. Others may see the implications of what they say better than they do. I believe Charles Taylor suggests for example that atheistic ontology is inconsistent with objective values. I can certainly testify that most secular people I speak to embrace relativism and reject objective values. There seems to be a disconnect here that I cannot yet understand.